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ABSTRACT

Heads of departments may find themselves in a counseling role both for staff and for students. Counseling in any department within a college requires skill and sensitivity to meet the needs of students and staff. Heads of departments may be faced with a variety of problems: students who complain about a staff member; scholastic failure or motivational loss because a course does not meet a student's expectations; students receiving insufficient feedback from tutors; complaints about facilities; or lack of communication between tutors and students. In addition, lecturers may complain about student behavior or achievement and request that the head of the department take disciplinary action against the student. One way to resolve such conflicts may be to set up a student/staff liaison committee in which to air complaints. One of the most difficult problems a head faces is that of conflicts between individual staff members within the department. Resolving negative aspects of staff room group dynamics requires preventive counseling. Directive counseling may be required when dealing with large groups of staff. Non-directive counseling may work well in personal counseling of staff or students. (Guidelines for preventive counseling with students and with staff are given, and things to avoid when counseling staff or students are listed.) (NB)

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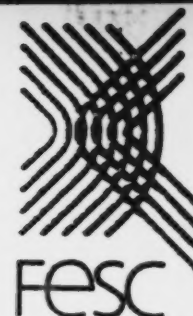
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THE COUNSELLING ROLE OF A HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Jeanie Brookes
Staff Tutor



Heads of department find themselves in a counselling role on many occasions, both for staff and students. I intend to look at some of the issues that surround an HoD and consider how these may be resolved, both through personal counselling for staff and students and through a preventive counselling approach.

Counselling in any department in a college of FE requires a great deal of skill and sensitivity to meet the needs of both students and staff. When HoDs find themselves in a counselling role with both students and staff, they will be hearing both sides of a dispute and will be expected by each to take some supportive action.

Conflict may occur if students complain about a member of staff. The head may feel that there are justifiable reasons for the complaint, but have difficulty in resolving them. Such complaints may include: homework not being marked and returned on time; teaching staff being absent due to illness or other reasons, resulting in changes of personnel and causing students to express anxiety about passing examinations, either because the member of staff holds different values and attitudes from the student, or because the teacher has inadvertently made some offensive comment.

Other issues which may come to the HoD's attention include: scholastic failure or motivational loss because a course does not meet the student's expectations; students being unaware of their strengths and weaknesses because of insufficient feed-back from tutors; failure of staff to visit students in placements resulting in disappointment and let-down for the student; complaints about inadequate and unsuitable facilities; or the lack of communication between tutors and students.

One or more lecturers may simultaneously complain that students are unable to cope with the course, that their work is below standard or that they are exhibiting anti-social behaviour, and may request the HoD to take disciplinary action with the students concerned. How do we resolve such issues? One way could be to set up a student/staff liaison committee in which complaints can be aired and both staff and students can begin to realise how the other group feels about certain rules and regulations. Often when people explain why a particular incident occurred, or what the financial restrictions are, a greater understanding is reached. Students and staff feel stressed when they are not informed of what may be happening and rumours and fantasies can be far worse than reality. Giving students the opportunity to discuss the matters with the HoD can defuse a lot of frustrations. Further suggestions as to how to assist students

are discussed below in the section on preventive counselling.

STAFF COUNSELLING

What about the counselling role with staff? One of the most difficult problems a head faces is that of conflicts or disputes between individual members of staff within the department. Human nature being what it is, such disputes are inevitable and it is unlikely that any staff room will be free from conflict, gossip, emotional upsets, excessive ambition, laziness, grief or troublemaking. It is not uncommon to find a lecturer who revels in the fact that another member of staff has failed in some way and who appears to enjoy stirring up trouble of one sort or another.

Resolving negative aspects of staff room group dynamics requires preventive counselling. For example, open staff meetings could be held once a fortnight, with all staff timetabled to be free to attend. The HoD should not use these meetings solely as an opportunity to give out information. The staff should prepare the agenda in such a way that feelings can be expressed. A word of caution here: if too much emotion is expressed and staff become upset by colleagues' comments, the responsibility lies with the HoD who should know how to deal with emotions and have a good understanding of group dynamics, preferably having had some training in counselling and interpersonal skills. Management training in the UK tends to omit the human relationships aspect of management and concentrates on 'safe' paperwork exercises; whereas 80% of the content of management training courses in the Scandinavian countries is on interpersonal skills.

Dealing with large groups of staff may require directive counselling, such as a Gestalt approach. I believe it is important to bring conflict into the open and to bring together members of staff who are complaining about one another. Holding regular staff meetings at which honest and open interchange is expected is one way of doing this. It requires considerable courage from the HoD, but managers who are unused to this approach are often surprised to find that the majority of their staff prefer openness to the hidden agendas and gossip which otherwise abound. Short term pain for long term gain!

PERSONAL COUNSELLING OF STAFF AND STUDENTS

Another counselling approach is the Rogerian method which is non-directive. Many HoDs will be aware of this theory. Those who are will realise it can be very time consuming and makes it necessary to prioritise time for it with what individual HoDs consider to be more 'important'. One of the most time consuming jobs for a head, in dealing with either staff or students, is listening to personal problems. It is often easier with students because the HoD is not directly affected. Students' problems are their own: they affect their families, their work and their life at college. While these things are clearly very important to the

student, they concern HoDs less directly than the problems of staff members which may concern the HoD as an individual. The HoD will be closely affected should the member of staff need help and, for example, request a period of absence. A lecturer may say, 'My child is ill. May I go home?' This may not cause much difficulty if there are others to share the load. If such absenteeism becomes regular, however, colleagues become annoyed and aggrieved. There are other serious problems concerning staff which place an HoD in a difficult position: alcoholism, gambling, marriage breakdown, bereavement, serious ill health, the need to nurse an ailing parent, and other examples of personal stress. The head may be genuinely sympathetic in such cases, but he has to consider seriously the effect on students if a member of staff is under-performing as a result of one or more such problems.

Listening to a member of staff with personal problems may be easy, making occasional allowances may be easy, but the real difficulty arises when there is a conflict between the needs of the individual member of staff and the needs of the students. For example, a teacher who consistently arrives late may have to be disciplined, even though the head is aware that a sick wife at home has to be cared for, or a child has to be taken to school. The answer is to be tough but tender. A major attribute for an HoD is the ability to bring these two elements together. Training in personal counselling techniques is another useful attribute.

PREVENTIVE COUNSELLING

A common misconception of counselling is the idea that it must be done on a 'one-to-one' basis. This is not true of an area of counselling of which HoDs should be aware: preventive counselling. Many problems and much stress can be avoided by preventive measures such as the following:

1. Preventive Counselling for Students

- (a) **Honest Publicity** Publicity for courses should be honest, not glossy and commercial. Students too often find that promised subjects or facilities are not, in the event, forthcoming. An important reason for motivational loss during courses is that student expectations are raised unrealistically by misleading publicity.
- (b) **Unbiased Vocational Counselling** It is essential that there is a selection procedure for students which takes into account their individual needs before they are offered places on courses. Staff sometimes feel under pressure 'to make up the numbers' in order to make courses viable, but this must not be allowed to happen. Problems may be avoided in this area by the appointment of a cross-department staff member with responsibility for vocational guidance.

- (c) **Induction Course** Once students have started a course there should be a comprehensive induction programme at an early stage. This should not be simply a conducted tour of the college. It should include meeting members of staff, activities designed to help form satisfactory relationships between students and staff; full information on student facilities, student support and student counselling; and welcomes from the principal, the HoD and the course tutors.
 - (d) **Study Skills** If students are to gain maximum benefit from a course, study skills should be part of the curriculum. Students will benefit from speed reading, speed writing, note taking, essay planning, study planning, and revision and examination techniques. The HoD may need to organise a staff development programme in this area as a first step.
 - (e) **Accommodation and Equipment** Classrooms, workshops, laboratories, library facilities, private study areas, gymnasium, common rooms and leisure areas need to be adequate for the needs of students. Such provision can relieve a considerable degree of stress and lead to more satisfactory study.
 - (f) **Evaluation** It is important that students receive regular feed-back from their tutors regarding their individual strengths and weaknesses. Projects and assessments should be done regularly throughout the year and not left until the end when they are likely to cause additional stress for the students. If students are asked to evaluate their own courses they often give HoDs valuable insights into changes that might be needed the following year.
 - (g) **Pastoral Care** An effective pastoral counselling network within a department can make an important contribution to student welfare. Because tutors are often unable to distinguish between academic and personal counselling there should, in addition to an effective personal tutorial system, be a confidential service which enables students to see 'qualified' counsellors. This is not to say that most tutors are not 'qualified', but if they are able to counsel their students effectively, tutors should receive some training in this area.
2. **Preventive Counselling for Staff**
- (a) **Professional Support** including in-service training, encouraging staff to attend external conferences, job rotation, assisting with teaching methods, offering new staff or student teachers a mentor and giving administrative support by offering secretarial assistance.

- (b) Staff Appraisal regular interviews to give staff the opportunity of a two-way evaluation exercise with the HoD. It is particularly important that staff who have failed either an internal or external interview for promotion are seen by the HoD to discuss why they were not selected or to discuss their future career.
- (c) Suitable Accommodation and Facilities for work and leisure. Staff workrooms and staff teaching resources are important as are recreational areas where staff can meet socially. Relaxation periods help to alleviate stress.
- (d) Access to Information by having a weekly staff meeting slot on the timetable, issuing a departmental newssheet with contributions from both staff and HoD; by issuing the minimum number of memoranda and sending them only for specific information, not for disciplinary matters.
- (e) Decision Making to ease stress on staff. It is often the fear of the unknown that causes staff to feel insecure and unsettled in their work. HoDs should avoid passing on their own anxieties to staff about decisions discussed with the principal or at HoDs' meetings. The head should wait until clear policy decisions have been made by the principal. When the HoD is in a position to make a decision for staff, he should inform them as soon as possible. If there must be a delay in decision making, this should be explained to staff.
- (f) Access to Heads of Departments is important so that the staff can discuss their areas of concern or course development. While some members of staff will ensure that they see the HoD, others, who are less confident, may find it more difficult. A preventive measure could be for the HoD to have an 'open door' session every week.
- (g) Clearly Defined Guidelines for all staff, particularly for personal tutors. A conflict is inherent in the role of the personal tutor. A good personal tutor is empathetic and caring towards his students, yet on occasions has to act as a disciplinarian. It can be difficult for a student to ask a tutor for help with a personal problem when that same person has recently reprimanded him about forgetting his homework or some other misdemeanour. Tutors also struggle with the question of confidentiality. The HoD needs to give guidelines to staff about such matters.
- (h) Personal Counselling appointing a college counsellor who can offer a confidential counselling service for staff as well as students. Some staff do not have anyone with whom they can discuss their problems. Counsellors could

offer a preventive service for staff by organising talks on topics such as 'How to Prevent Stress' and by arranging staff support groups.

WHAT SHOULD HoDS AVOID WHEN COUNSELLING STAFF OR STUDENTS?

1. Excessive curiosity which leads the HoD to ask too many questions and constantly leads the person being counselled off their own track.
2. Too much haste to find a quick solution to the problem presented. This approach fails to solve or even to notice the real problem which underlies the problem initially presented.
3. Blocking expressions of feelings and emotions - trying to stop a person crying or expressing his distress doesn't help in any way.
4. Being too busy to listen is the ultimate put-down for some who may have invested great courage in approaching the HoD and asking for some of his time.
5. Filling silences - if the head cannot tolerate silence and jumps in with repeated questions or comments, the real issues will never be reached.
6. Being a clever psychologist - some heads fancy themselves as amateur psychologists and believe they are particularly perceptive. They off-load their insights on to the staff or student they are trying to help.
7. Wanting to be liked - some heads have a desperate need to be indispensable and it is more important to them that the person likes them than that he is helped.
8. Attempting to take over the staff or student's problems and solve them. The HoD can make the person feel totally useless by doing this. He should accept the person being counselled as a responsible adult.

HOW DO WE COUNSEL MOST EFFECTIVELY?

1. By listening and allowing the person to tell his own story in his own time.
2. By not imposing our own moral values.
3. By not identifying with the client.
4. By giving non-judgemental positive regard.

It is difficult, but it is worth it.